



THE DEAL

➔ **Getting there:** Guangxi is in southern China. You can fly there from Macau, Bangkok or Hong Kong. The rice terraces and Yangshuo are reached by flying to Guilin. Cathay Pacific has connections for Guilin, with flights via Hong Kong from \$1445 inc. taxes. [www.flightcentre.com.au](http://www.flightcentre.com.au)

➔ **Touring:** The seven-day Bike Asia Yangshuo Rice Terraces bicycle tour with a private guide for one or more people is \$680pp. [www.bikeasia.com](http://www.bikeasia.com)



# China easy riders

China is made for two-wheeled tourists.

**Ewen Bell** finds a trip big on scenery, not sweat

IT'S DOWNHILL all the way on this bike tour of Guangxi province — a taste of China that starts at the pristine mountain streams of Longshen and finishes in the wide open spaces of rural Guilin.

This is a tour of contrast, revealing the diversity of culture and cuisine that makes Guangxi province the hot-spot for adventure-starved travellers in China.

China is great for bicycle tours because the culture is already accepting of cyclists.

Southern China is popular for such tours because it's very scenic, has lots of flat terrain for riding and is populated with lots of towns within riding distance of each other.

Few visitors to southern China don't get on a bike for a day trip, but longer two-wheeled tours are becoming more popular.

This Bike Asia tour may not be the most challenging bike ride in all of Asia, but it is possibly the most scenic.

In Longshen, a village built along a pristine mountain stream with stunning views of rice terraces, locals spend their days walking higher into the hills to tend their narrow gardens of rice and corn, returning to town every day to enjoy a little rice wine before, during and after dinner.

Visitors can also trek to some of the remote villages where growing and drying chillies is big business.

Timber houses are still popular in Longshen, housing several generations of the one family.

With a wave goodbye to the town, the trail heads south — more of a dirt track than a trail at first, but at least

no tourist buses are racing around the corners.

The big challenge is keeping your speed down on the steep downhill sections, and taking care to avoid cows and chickens.

In spring ducklings gather in clusters, following their mothers blindly.

Dodging the chirping broods is an unpredictable challenge, causing me more than once to fall off to avoid a fatal flattening.

Once you leave the rice terraces the terrain opens wide and the riding is easy. A few sections are made quicker by using the bicycle lanes on the highway, but most of the journey is through rural landscapes.

Guangxi is as fertile as it is beautiful.

GETTING out into the country on bicycles brings you up close with the smallest villages. Clusters of houses built from handmade bricks reflect the influence of imperial architecture, though the occasional TV antenna looks a little out of place.

Bewildered farmers sit in their doorways and watch the cyclists go by, confused at first by our greetings but quick to respond with a smile.

Tea plantations also dot the landscape. Traditional techniques from this area blend flowers and herbs with lightly fermented tea leaves to produce the delicate aromas of jasmine, osmanthus and ginseng tea.

Chinese people drink more tea than water, so their preference for high-grade leaves reflects an acquired taste for quality.

Even if you don't intend to take



**Mind the beast:** (top) and ducks and chickens.

**So scenic:** (above) Longshen houses with rice terraces.

**High rise:** (left) Zhuang village.

**Limestone country:** (right) Yangshuo.



some home with you, the plantations make for pleasant viewing.

Once you get past the city of Guilin the scenery becomes increasingly dramatic.

This region of Guangxi is famous for its limestone karst hills — rocky towers that rise sharply between the flat terrain of rice fields and rivers.

Our cycling adventure follows the Lijiang River downstream, exploring some of the best examples of karst scenery in the province.

Spending the night in Xingping allows a chance to explore the old town at its best.

In the middle of the day, hordes of tourists are shipped in by boat, but at

dusk the entire village sighs in relief when they depart.

From the boat harbour you can walk 800m up river and marvel at the same view that features on China's 20-yuan note.

Communities of farmers work in their fruit and vegetable fields along the banks of the Lijiang, drawing water from the river.

Few concessions are made to modern farming, such as the use of rubber hoses to pipe water or plastic rope to lash down green beans.

Bamboo and rattan are still the preferred materials for making tools and baskets.

The final day of cycling takes us

into the countryside a little farther, to farmers' markets, rustic bridges and quaint villages.

As the ride gets closer to the town of Yangshuo, signs of western influence emerge.

One enterprising local has converted his onion stall to a bicycle repair shop, to help day-trippers from the town who get punctures.

This bicycle tour has a gentle pace, averaging less than 70km each day, and there's little in the way of hills to climb.

If you've been thinking about trying a two-wheeled adventure, this one is the perfect sampler for beginners.